

The Wicked World of Marketing Management

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Abstract

This paper reports some of the central findings of an extensive ethnographic study of a team of senior marketing managers in the UK subsidiary of a major multi-national supplier of branded consumer goods. It responds to repeated calls for more in-depth research that examines what marketing managers actually do and how their understandings inform their actions. It is argued that the particular character of the decisional milieu that confronts marketing managers has a central impact on their conduct and that this can be better understood by employing Rittel's conception of wicked problems and Mischel's conception of weak situations. It is demonstrated that the marketing managers studied confront a weakly situated wicked complex of commercial contradictions. It is contended that, due to their embedded formal techno-rationality, the marketing management discourse and pedagogy currently fail to speak to this reality of marketing management.

Key words: Critical Marketing; Wicked Problems; Marketing Management.

1. Introduction

There is a wealth of prescription within the marketing management discourse and pedagogy, as to what marketing managers ought to be 'doing' and how they should be doing it. There is, however, relatively little substantive empirical insight into what managers in marketing actually 'do', how they do it, and why they do it the way they do (Skalen and Hackley 2011); despite repeated calls for such research (Brownlie *et al.* 1994). In 2007, Svensson commented that the question "*what is marketing work?*" remains largely unaddressed (275). Skalen and Hackley (2011: 189) confirm this is still largely the case in the introduction to their recent special issue focussed on 'marketing-as-practice', and highlight the "lack of bottom-up empirical research into how marketing is actually done in organizations" as a major issue. This study responds to Skalen and Hackley's call for more empirical research by reporting some of the insights into marketing managerial work obtained through an extensive 18 month ethnographic study.

Brownlie and Saren (1997) conclude from a largely unreported quasi-ethnography of several marketing managers that, although marketing managers do engage in the normative practices inhered within the marketing discourse and pedagogy: "... [they] *do not engage with them in ways prescribed by the theory. Nor can the processes they are part of be accounted for...through the currently available language of marketing management*" (155). Our extensive field research leads us to strongly concur with their contention, and building on the findings of one particular earlier ethnography of marketing managers (Lien 1997), this paper attempts to craft at least the beginnings of an explanation for this apparent phenomenon. It is our simple contention that the character of the decisional milieu in which marketing managers are immersed will have a profound impact upon their behaviour and hence "*how marketing is actually done in organizations*" (Skalen and Hackley 2011: 189). It is to the character of this decisional milieu to which this paper turns our attention.

As many researchers have highlighted (Egan, 2009, Ardley 2009; Brown 1996; Hackley 1998; Brownlie 1992), much of the marketing management discourse is objectivist, techno-rational and logico-sequentialist. Wicked problems and contradictory demands are simply not amenable to solution through the techno-rationalistic problem solving approach endemic to the marketing management discourse (Rittel 1972). Our research leads us to conclude that the decisional milieu which marketing managers confront is '*weak if not always wicked*' in character (Rittel 1972; Rittel and Webber 1973; Mischel 1977). We demonstrate that our studied marketing managers confront a 'weak' situation that is littered with wicked problems and suffused with contradictory demands.

We contend that a central reason for the acute discord between the practice of marketing manager decision-making and the prescriptions of the marketing management discourse, particularly its pedagogy, that Egan (2009), Ardley (2009), (Hackley 1998), Brownlie (1992), Brown (1996), and many others, have long identified is a result of the stark

difference between the character of the decisional milieu actually confronted in practice and the character of the decisional milieu assumed by the discourse. One might argue that until these foundational assumptions are challenged, up-rooted and replaced that the marketing management pedagogy will continue to provide a dysfunctional educational grounding for aspiring marketing managers. With the conceptions developed in this paper we believe we provide significant insight as to what problematic foundational assumptions should be re-placed and how a rejuvenated marketing management pedagogy could be built.

Following this introduction, we consider the rather limited previous research available on the nature of marketing managerial work. Next we examine perspectives on the character of the marketing manager decisional milieu. We then introduce the notion of wicked problems, highlight their characteristics and further develop the conception. We then proceed to report the key findings and conclusions from the fieldwork.

2. Previous Research into the Nature of Marketing Managerial Work

The extensive stream of empirical investigations into what became known as ‘the nature of managerial work’ has spanned over five decades (Hales 1999 and 1986; McCall *et al.* 1978). Sadly only a very few managerial work studies have captured marketing managers in their samples; fewer still with any analytic intent, and even fewer in a way that distinguishes between marketing and sales managers (Kraut and Pedigo 1989; Fox 1992; Gibb 1994). This said, however, Fox (1992), and two of Stewart’s studies (1967, 1976), purposively incorporated marketing managers. Fox (1992) suggests that only two of Mintzberg’s (1971) classic roles were clearly evident in the behaviour of his subject managers, those of ‘Negotiator’ and ‘Disseminator’. The marketing and sales managers captured in the work were additionally characterised as ‘Group Manager’, ‘External Contact’, ‘Scheduler’, ‘Organiser’, ‘Go-Between’, and ‘Expert’; but not as ‘Discusser’, ‘Trouble-Shooter’ or ‘Resource Allocator’ role. The absence of marketing managers from the discusser category is, from our perspective, remarkable.

Outside the managerial work research arena, one particular species of the genus marketing manager, the product/brand manager, has received substantial empirical attention (e.g. Luck 1969, Low and Fullerton 1994, Buell 1975; Cosse and Swann 1983; Maute and Locander 1994). The characteristics of this particular marketing role identified by these various studies bring into stark relief the peer dependence that Stewart’s (1967, 1979) minor but insightful studies of marketing managerial work highlight. Other than this these studies of product managers shed little light on the character of marketing managerial work.

Piercy’s survey-based studies of marketing planning, budgeting and information handling (e.g. Piercy 1984, 1989), together with Bonoma’s extensive case study research into the practice of marketing strategy (Bonoma 1984, 1985, 1986) conclude that managing-in-marketing is, just as it is in managing in any other specialism, an inherently micro-political social practice (*cf.* Kotter 1977; Mangham 1979, 1986; Butcher and Clarke 2003); so much so according to Bonoma that marketing managers must be ‘subversive’ in order to be effective. Something Hackley (2003) confirms in his study, where he sharply contrasts the central power position that is ascribed to the marketer within the discourse, with the politically constrained realities of the marketing management role in practice. A constrained reality where marketing practitioners can be seen to have to constantly work up their professional identities, both externally and internally (Alvesson, 1994; Svensson 2007; Hackley 2000).

The only substantial studies of marketing manager work deploying the ethnographic method, other than that on which this paper is based, are those of Jarventie-Thesleff *et al.* (2011), von Koskull and Fougere (2011), Lien (1997) and Prus (1989). Jarventie-Thesleff *et al.*’s study focussed on the characterisation of the practices seemingly manifest in the corporate branding process, and develops the idea that brand building processes are produced/re-produced in the everyday activities of many different practitioners in many different parts of the firm. The ethnography of Koskull and Fougere targets an understanding of the connection between traditional perspectives on customer orientation in service development and in service development in reality. They find that appeals for such an orientation do not necessarily lead to the activities and outcomes the prescriptions of the discourse lead one to expect. As Skalen and Hackley (2011: 191) point out, the studies of Lien and Prus confirm that marketing managers “*talk and write*” most of the time, as do all managers (*cf.* Stewart 1983; Hales 1999, 1986; Boden 1994; Gron 1983), and unsurprisingly that “*Marketing professionals write reports, advertising copy, strategy documents, marketing research briefs, presentations, sales analyses, emails, and sales pitches ... [and that] ... when not writing, marketing managers are usually in meetings, discussing the things they have written*” (Skalen and Hackley 2011: 191).

As Svensson (2007) concludes in his review of the area, none of the latter ethnographic studies, nor the few other more traditional empirical endeavours in the area (e.g. Moeran 2005; Hackley 2000; Hochschild 1983; Laing and McKee 2000; Leidner 1993) “*pose the ... question what is marketing work*” (275), nor do they, or Svensson himself,

attempt to illuminate the character of the decisional milieu with which marketing managers contend. However, amidst these empirical studies Ardley's (2005, 2006) phenomenological interviews and Lien's (1997) ethnographic study of product management provides some significant insights as to the stochastic nature of the decisional milieu in which marketing managers are immersed, and their findings have resonance with the developed perspective.

Brownlie himself engaged in an ethnographic study of six senior marketing managers in a variety of industries. His fieldwork, however, did not lead him to the conceptualisation of their marketing management endeavours that he may have once envisaged producing (Brownlie 1991), but to a deep methodological reflection, and more questions (Brownlie 1997). Avoiding the methodological pitfalls that beset Brownlie was foremost in our mind in the design of our study.

3. The Marketing Manager Milieu

Lien's (1997) quasi-ethnographic study of product managers in a Norwegian food company confirms the intense lateral-relational character and peer dependence of marketing manager work highlighted by Stewart (1967, 1979), but also points to what we believe to be a crucial aspect of this work: *"Uncertainty associated with what consumers want was ... a source of discomfort. As an attempt to reduce uncertainty in marketing decisions a considerable effort was being made to acquire and produce knowledge that might help to predict these matters ... Yet interpretation is fraught with uncertainty as well ..."* (Lien 1997: 5). Lien's study provides an illuminating vignette that illustrates the decisional milieu in which marketing managers are immersed: *"I started out following this process [new poultry product introduction] ... what is ... striking is the intense effort expended by the actors on creating order out of chaos ... Final decisions are often based on an evaluation that goes far beyond the realm of rational deduction..."* (Lien 1997: 161-162). As Lien (1997: 5) points out, her subject product managers had even to decide *"what poultry should really taste like"*. Complementarily, Piercy (1984: 18) concludes that the situation in which marketing managers most often find themselves would appear to be one of much ambiguity where *"...there is a lack of consensus about goals, and about the causal links between actions and results"*.

As we shall demonstrate, the ethnographic material captured in this study strongly supports these contentions, and we believe that Lien and Piercy touch upon crucial characteristics of the marketing managerial milieu that the marketing management discourse has failed to acknowledge. They are characteristics with which the discourse cannot contend given its objectivist, and quintessentially techno-rationalist foundation.

In what follows we contend that Rittel's conception of wicked problems holds the key to a penetrative illumination of the decisional milieu of marketing managers. We first set out Rittel's conception of wicked problems and then continue with its unpacking and re-assembly into a more easily operationalized framework that we have come to term 'problem space'. We then move on to report a detailed analytic case study of the complexity of wicked problems with which the studied team contended. We argue that the deployed examples and case study demonstrate the power Rittel's wicked problem conception holds, when appropriately unpacked, for helping us understand the character of the decisional milieu of marketing managers. It is an understanding we see as having significant implications for marketing management pedagogy.

4. Wicked Problems

A problem can be defined as a disparity between the situation experienced by an actor and the situation that the actor would prefer. If you are ill, you would like to be well. If you are poor, you may like to be rich. If you are a brand manager with a low market-share, you may like it to be higher. Problems normally motivate actions, although of course one solution to a problem is to learn to live with the disparity of current and desired states that it represents and people normally tend to act rationally in the sense that they attempt to anticipate the consequences of contemplated actions: we tend to think before we act.

Whilst it is obvious that problem solving, and rationality as such, has always been a central component of the conduct of Homo-Sapiens, the application of what is termed formal rationality to human action only really began in earnest with the age of enlightenment in the 17th century. Since that time the success of technology, underpinned by progress in the physical sciences, has led to the codification and promulgation of a general problem solving method. It can take slightly different forms but it is generally sequentialist and includes the following steps: understand the problem, gather information, analyse the situation, generate solutions, assess the solutions and pick one, implement it, test it, and modify it. This mode of 'problem solving' is often termed techno-rationalistic decision making; and it is this mode of reasoning that implicitly and explicitly suffuses, and still dominates, the mainstream marketing management pedagogy and discourse.

The substantial and often disastrous dysfunction of this approach in one particular area, that of town planning, led Rittel to conclude that the forms of problem that had to be contended with in that arena, and in cognate areas, were fundamentally insusceptible to the techno-rationalistic decision making process described above. In his now seminal work 'On the Planning Crisis' (1972) he critiqued the decision making of 'systems analysts and designers' and developed a perspective on what he saw as the key factors characterising very many of the problems faced; one that explained the failure of the dominant techno-rationalism of planning. The conception of problem wickedness has now re-surfaced in the management literature. Camillus (2008: 100), in the *Harvard Business Review*, reports on research that finds wickedness in the area of strategy:

"Several CEOs admit that they are confronted with issues that cannot be resolved merely by gathering additional data, defining issues more clearly, or breaking them down into small problems. Their planning techniques don't generate fresh ideas, and implementing the solutions those processes come up with is fraught with political peril. That's because, I believe, many strategy issues aren't just tough or persistent – they're "wicked"."

In the area of risk management *"Wicked problems are those where behavioural complexity is high; where complex underlying social realities are inescapable; and where different groups of key decision makers hold differing assumptions, values and beliefs that are in opposition to one another"* (Holt 2004: 259). The responsibility of leaders when facing a wicked problem becomes distinct: *"...the leaders' role with a wicked problem is to ask the right questions rather than provide the right answers because the answers may not be self evident and will require a collaborative process to make any kind of progress"* (Grint 2005: 1473).

Rittel (1972) characterised problems as 'tame' or 'wicked'. A tame problem might be deciding which postal service to use for an important next day delivery. A relatively tame problem might be on which page to place a particular size of advertisement in a magazine such that it generates more than a specific number of sales leads. The goals are clear and there will be captured data and information available that allow simple projections. Put simply, tame problems are amenable to solutions using the rationalistic problem-solving approach outlined above. Rittel (1972) contended that there are certain 'properties' of problems that made them, one might say, 'untameable' - insusceptible to the techno-rationalistic approach; problems with such properties he termed 'wicked'. We crystallise Rittel's complex array of interlinked properties below.

There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem and hence no 'stopping rule'. A definitive problem formulation would require access to all the information required to solve the problem, and the information required depends upon the route to solution selected – *one has to start at the end to get to a beginning*. As Rittel and Webber (1973: 161) put it *"The formulation of a wicked problem is the problem"*; and since there is no possibility of the precise formulation of a wicked problem there is no way of knowing if you are at a point where further improvement in the situation attained is unachievable – therefore no stopping rule.

The discrepancy at the heart of a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways and as with all forms of problems the choice of explanation determines how the problem's resolution can be attacked. Therefore wicked problems do not have an enumerable nor well described set of options for their solution. Explanations often involve tenuous logical and causal links in order to explain in the first instance why a particular situation pertains and why a particular solution might work, but also why others will not necessarily work. Answers to the question(s) why we are where we are rather than where we wish to be, and why we should act in one way rather than another in attacking this discrepancy are fundamentally indeterminate.

Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem. It is never certain that the problem should be tackled as stated or characterised and that it is not simply a statement of the consequence of another problem; possibly a wicked one itself. There is no clear stopping rule in the pursuit of causality.

There is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem and every solution to a wicked problem is a 'one-shot operation' because there is no consequence-free opportunity to learn by trial and error; every attempt counts significantly. Implementation of an apparent solution to a wicked problem will simply change the system, often in unpredictable ways. Previous attempts to solve a wicked problem change the starting situation, and hence the problem. Pure scientists can test their hypotheses 'in-vitro'; decision makers can only act 'in-vivo'. They are responsible for the real world consequences of their decisions and actions, intended or unintended, and the consequences of their actions are most often irreversible; there is no 'start from scratch' option.

It can be argued that there are several logical inconsistencies in the outlined properties of Rittel's wicked problem conception. The most obvious of which is that they imply that wicked problems cannot be solved, and yet refer

continually to their solution. One way out of this is to argue that wicked problems are never solved but only resolved; a point to which we will return later.

Additionally there is no conception of degrees of problem wickedness. We concur with Sementelli (2007) when he contends that what is needed is a better means to understand the complexity of wicked problems. As there is no conception of the dimensions, degree or types of problem wickedness in Rittel's listing of problem properties, the wickedness/tameness of individual problems cannot be easily characterised, readily understood or communicated. In response we contend that wicked and tame problems could be seen as 'ideal' problem types; polarities of a 'problem space' for the wicked pole of which Rittel illuminates an array of interdependent properties. Rittel's is a powerful illumination, but for the reasons elaborated above, one that we found not to lend itself easily to deployment with regard to either practice, pedagogy or research - is a problem wholly tame simply because it does not possess one particular property? Rittel's enumerated problem characteristics are also somewhat entangled and the dimensions of a putative problem space are not easily distinguished from each other.

We therefore proceeded to dis-entangle Rittel's problem properties to dimensionalize a problem space in which we could locate and position our studied managers' problem portfolios. Once dis-entangled, we contend that the problem properties conceived by Rittel, represent the basis of dimensions of a space in which all problems can be positioned. Rittel's wicked problem properties can be seen to have running through them three basic dimensions of wickedness: *equivocality*, *equifinality* and *reversibility*.

Equivocality is, as Weick (1995: 27) puts it, "*where there are too many meanings not too few ... [where] ... the problem is not ignorance but confusion*". Situations of extreme equivocality are what might be termed 'weak' (cf. Mischel 1968). They are situations of fundamental indeterminacy where "*...the characteristics of the situation are not clear-cut enough to dictate a course of action ... [and where] ... the decision maker's personal frame of reference, not the objective characteristics of the situation, become the basis for action*" (Finkelstein and Hambrick 1996: 20). Given a rejection of a naive objectivism and the consequent conclusion that "*...there is no such thing as a view from nowhere*" (Nagel 1996: 161) it is obvious that all situations are inherently weak to some degree. Situations are also fundamentally weak, in a sense that Rittel's conception does not draw out very clearly – that of there being a multiplicity of potential objectives from which to craft problems, given a problem is defined as a disparity between the situation experienced and the situation desired.

The concept of equifinality is drawn from systems theory (Beer 1959). It is simply the term used within cybernetics to describe a situation where there exist many routes to a single end – a problem of too many routes to resolution, not too few. It is clear that all problems are *equifinal* to some degree, as even in the last degree, as was mentioned earlier, there is always the 'do nothing' as well as the 'do something' option; the problem can simply be dissolved rather than resolved. Hence, given that all situations are weak but some are weaker than others and that all situations are equifinal but some are more equifinal than others, one can contend that *all* problems are wicked but some are just less wicked than others.

These two dimensions, equivocality and equifinality, can be combined to construct a simple space that can be used to characterise problems. Wicked problems can be seen to be characterised by both high situational weakness and a high degree of equifinality; tame problems by situational strength and low equifinality. This dimensionalisation is graphically illustrated in Figure 1. The absence of an 'origin' in the chart denotes the real world impossibility of absolute problem tameness.

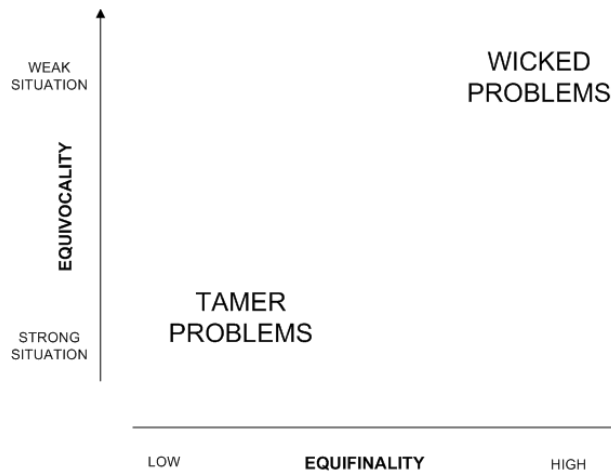


Figure 1
Conceptualising Problem Space

This is a problem space which enables one to craft a tentative taxonomy of problem types based around four polarities, and to succumb, if one is so inclined, to the inevitable four box matrix (see Figure 2), which we now explain.

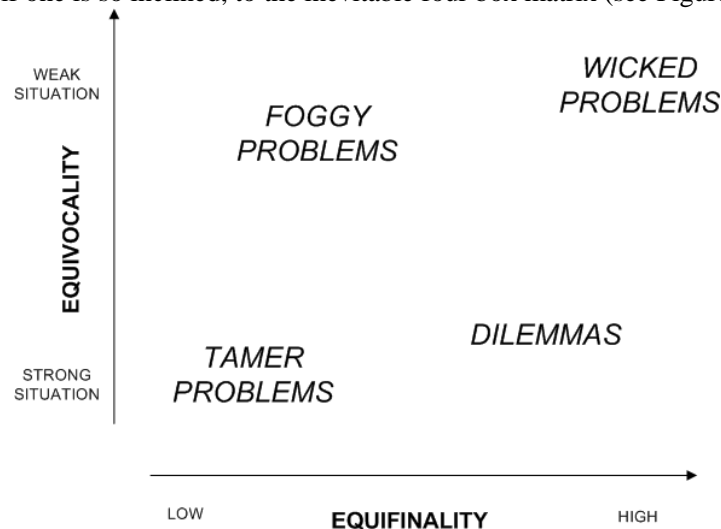


Figure 2
Taxonomy of Problem Types

The 'foggy zone' is populated by those problems characterised by a high degree of situational weakness and a limited number of viable solutions. 'Dilemmas' are those problems where the pertaining situation is strong and relatively unequivocal, and where there is somewhat finite degree of equifinality.

To complete the re-construction of Rittel's conception of problem wickedness, a third dimension (*reversibility*) can be added to take account of the degree to which attempted resolutions prevent any real degree of return to the initial state of affairs (Figure 3). Of course, in absolute sense, this return is never possible but some degree of freedom from persistent situation-changing consequences is often possible. 'Ideal type' tame problems can clearly be seen as sitting at the origin where situations are strong, equifinality is low and situational reversibility high.

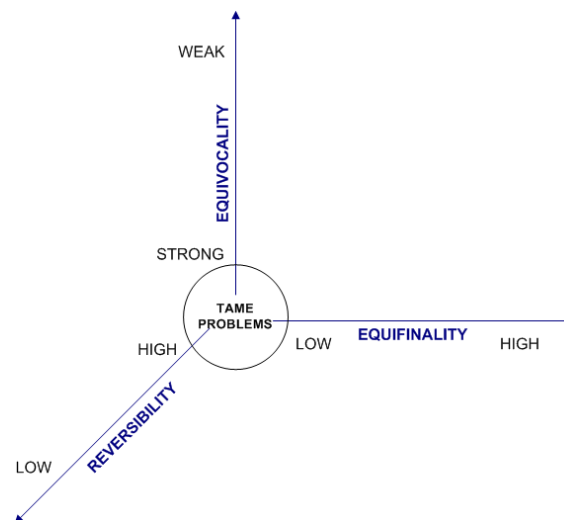


Figure 3
A Dimensionalisation of Problem Space

This three-fold dimensionalisation of the problem space does not however take account of one property that Rittel ascribes to wicked problems: *Every wicked problem is ‘essentially unique’*. In the absolute and/or trivial senses all problems may be unique, but the ‘essential uniqueness’ of Rittel’s wicked problems rests in the impossibility of any form of general solution; an impossibility driven by the combination of the characteristics inherent in a wicked positioning in the defined problem space. The ‘uniqueness’ to which Rittel refers is therefore an outcome of the character of problems located in certain zones of the defined problem space rather than an intrinsic property of problems in/of themselves. Just as is another wicked problem quality that Rittel brings out: *Solutions to wicked problems are not true or false, but only good or bad to differing degrees*. Solutions to wicked problems are, and can only be judged in terms of the values that actors espouse, not against some supposedly ‘objective’ metric. Given a pragmatist-constructivist perspective, this is the case for all problems, not only wicked ones – for as William James (1920) the pragmatist philosopher concludes: “the true” is only what “the expedient in our thinking” is, in the long run and on the whole.

Given the foregoing we can be seen to agree with Coyne (2005: 12) when he argues “wickedness is the norm ... there are no tame problems ... It is the tame problem formulations of professional analysis that stand out as a deviation”. It is a ‘dysfunctional form of professional analysis’ we see as persisting in the marketing management discourse and pedagogy. Dysfunctional because, as we shall shortly see, our subject managers rarely had the privilege of dealing with any commercially significant problems that came close to having the tame co-ordinates to which the fundamentally techno-rationalist discourse could potentially speak.

5. The Research Design and Methods

The form of access that enabled the degree of organizational penetration, business comprehension, and ‘proximity-to-subject’ that was necessary in order to obtain the rich empirical material required for our research was determined to be that of participant observation enabled ethnography (Lofland and Lofland, 1984; Hammersley, 1992; Denzin, 1997; Delamont, 2004; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Lofland *et al.* 2006; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The ethnography deployed all the component anthropological methods – extensive longitudinal participant and non-participant observation, together with the longitudinal unstructured interviewing of respondents (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983).

The marketing management milieu to which we gained access was that of a group of senior marketing managers, and their subordinates, in the large (£250M t/o) UK subsidiary of a major multi-national corporation, henceforth codenamed *Fitcorp*. *Fitcorp* were, and continue to be, involved in the supply of branded goods to multi-national, major national, regional and small independent local retailers within the UK.

Ethnographic research design is a continuously reflexive process and cannot easily be predetermined prior to field research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Maxwell, 2004; Riemer 1977; Pieke, 1995). Over a number of years *Fitcorp* had conducted customer satisfaction surveys and as far as the managing director was concerned the process had achieved very little. As a result contact was made with the management school of a university based in the North-west

of the UK, and a new approach was conceived. A project was designed with the overall aim of *Fitcorp* gaining a: “better understanding of their retail customers, the relationships they have with them and, most important of all, their capacity to respond and improve their performance”. We agreed to participate in this work in return for substantial research access to their senior marketing managers, their subordinates and their peers in different functions, not uncommon in organizational ethnographies (Smigel, 1958; Mungham and Thomas, 1981). Against this background, the purpose of the research design was to develop theory through in-depth access at *Fitcorp* as opposed to testing existing theory (a key tenet of ethnography, Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Dey, 2004; Pidgeon and Henwood, 2004).

An important aspect of credibility in ethnography is not to be viewed as an outsider, or worse, a management spy (Hunt, 1984; Kaplan, 1991), but rather to adopt a ‘midway position’ (Junker, 1960) between participant-as-observer and observer-as-participant (Gold, 1958). In this study this problem was mitigated in part by gaining trust through “mutuality” (Beynon, 1983; Hudson, 2004), in this case a professional *quid pro quo* by participating in the special project that *Fitcorp* were engaged in.

It was proposed that *Fitcorp* mobilize a cross-functional team comprised of appropriate managers from all the pertinent functions to develop a response to the findings. The proposal was accepted, and it was agreed that we would facilitate the team’s work on the basis that we could have continued access to their senior marketing managers and, in addition, utilise the intervention itself as part of the empirical work. We worked with this senior cross functional group, in a facilitation role, for over 15 months. During this time one of us worked in *Fitcorp* on average five days per week and were given office space and over this period the team met on ten occasions; each session lasting three to six hours. The team’s meetings were digitally recorded. Copies of artefacts such as flip-chart work, agendas, actions arising notes were also collected. The team studied included the marketing director, his consumer marketing manager and trade marketing manager, the customer service manager, the two deputy sales directors and both of the senior product managers together with the manager of Logistics –a key function in the project. The participant observation ran concurrently with the longitudinal diary-stimulated interviewing (each marketing manager was interviewed at least once per month over six months, all were digitally recorded) that was semi-structured in design. The combination of data sources allowed us to effectively triangulate our findings, hence increasing the rigour of this research.

The opportunity to ‘observe’ and engage with these managers in so many extensive and wide-ranging meetings was particularly relevant to our research questions given, as Schwartzman and Boden conclude from their empirical studies, “*Meetings are significant because they are the organization writ small*” (Schwartzman 1987: 288); “*Meetings are where organizations come together ... they are the occasioned expression of management-in-action, that very social action through which institutions produce and reproduce themselves*” (Boden 1994: 81). This afforded us a rich understanding of the working environment at *Fitcorp* and of the behaviour of our collaborators. A summary of the detail of the fieldwork is provided in Table 1.

| Nature of fieldwork | Duration |
|---|---|
| Participant and non-participant observation of managers in non-formal settings | Continuous over a period of 30 months |
| Researcher diary | Continuous over a period of 30 months |
| Combination of participant and non-participant observation of the 12 cross-functional Key Account “Steering Group” Meetings | 3-5 hours per meeting, over a 12 month period |
| Full and ‘formal’ Work-shadows | 5-8 days in length of 2 marketing managers and 1 marketing director |
| Participant observation of 17 cross-functional Key Account Service/Account Plan implementation team meetings | 1-2 hours per meeting, over a 12 month period |
| Interviews with Board Directors and Managers; including regular periodic interviewing of Steering Group members during the 12 months of its operation | 113 of 60-90 minutes each |
| Document capture: emails, meeting actions-arising notes/minutes, flip-chart work from meetings, presentations, and planning documentation. | Continuous collection for duration of project |

Table 1
Nature and Duration of Fieldwork

Typical to most ethnographic studies, data analysis was not a distinct stage of the research, but rather an iterative process (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), which considers the interplay between the data, ideas, and literature (Dubois and Gadde 2002). In practical terms this dialectical approach draws on the unstructured and raw data and places it into categories in order to form an explanation of ‘some aspect of social process’ (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lofland *et al.* 2006).

Three aspects of validity (internal, construct and external) were adopted in order to ensure rigour in the data collection and results (Gibbert, Ruigrok and Wicki 2008; Yin, 1994). This included (i.) capturing multiple perspectives through interviewing actors at different levels and functions in the organization, (ii.) different data collection strategies and sources (e.g. in-depth interviews, meeting observation, official progress documents and minutes of meetings) were employed in order to gain alternate perspectives, and (iii.) periodically contrasting the findings of the study with the existing literature. Reliability – ensuring transparency and the possibility of replicating the study (Gibbert *et al.* 2008; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994) a study protocol was developed that outlines how the study was conducted and a database of study notes, transcribed interviews, minutes of meetings and observations of meetings was utilized in order to facilitate case study replication (Leonard-Barton 1990). In addition, a field diary was kept, which was used, in part, to question the results of the study and to help provide context.

All the quotes used in the paper are drawn from the fieldwork and are shown in italics. Our sincere thanks must go to the firm that welcomed us with open arms, and to the marketing managers that allowed us such intimate access to their work lives

6. Findings

6.1 The Wicked Milieu of Marketing Management

Marketing Managers’ problems - Foggy, if not always Wicked?

We have selected a number of representative quotes from the collected empirical material which illustrate the ‘position in problem space’ that the studied marketing managers’ milieu was seen to occupy.

Outside of the most trivial aspects of their work the studied marketing managers undertook, they were seen to engage with few problems that tended to the tame quadrant of the defined problem space; even when discussing their expense claims such questions as the boundary between claimable sundries and personal expenditure was clearly not always a strong situational characteristic. It was also clearly the case that reversibility was rarely a characteristic of their problems – a consequence often of the boundary spanning character of their roles: *“You told [Retailer D] that we do an ‘available at’ tag on the outdoor [advertising posters] ... now we really are stuck with it ... there’s no way we can back track”*.

The empirical material strongly suggests that the problem milieu in which the managers were immersed was one that was almost inevitably weak if not always highly wicked. Weak situationality gives rise to problems that rest on a spectrum of wickedness that ranges from the apparently simple foggiess of an information deficit: *“...if only they would give us the ‘sell-through’ figures it would be dead simple to figure it out and draw down some more stock”*; to the extremely wicked:

“the buyer is saying one thing and telling us to go jump, their marketing guy is out of the loop, but according to our account manager their MD is with us on this, even though their market research findings run largely contrary to it ...but our sales guy ain’t the most trustworthy ... what to do? I could push it but if I upset the buyer she’ll possibly stuff us next month ... but we need the order. Or do we really?”

The source of weakness can be intra-organizational or extra-organizational – in the external market and competitive environment, or in both:

“There’s the Brand president ... so many brands ... you’ve got A, B, C, D and so on. Then you’ve got the Worldwide VP, then the Chief Marketing officer, then you have someone else, then group communications and PR, and marketing of course, then Europe. Who to listen to?”

“The two most senior marketing people globally have different opinions as to where I should spend most of the money. It’s sticky at the moment and I have fallen out with them ... managed to disagree with both of them”.

Customers, fellow managers and even the subject do not see the ‘stuff’ (e.g. marketing proposals), in the same way. In addition, neither their expectancies of the outcomes nor the most appropriate response patterns are the same. In creative work where the individual’s assessment is often a function of taste or what they might expect, in this case what will actually appeal to the final customer; and with the incorporation of some simple futurity, problems like these turn wicked indeed:

“We have to decide, looking at the high street, is that a one season wonder, or is it going to stick around?”

“Those [products] just seem to be flying off the shelves, but for how long? [Competitor X] are due something I’m sure ... well not sure ... it really is just flying at the moment. What the hell do we do?”

In the case above the differences of views about the situation are internal to the organisation. In the boundary spanning roles of the studied managers many differences of view that drove situational weakness were inter-organizational, and often critical in their impact:

“The way our key accounts see themselves, and the way we see them, can be very different”.

“It’s subjective. We’re subjective. Our [customers] are even more subjective. You present stuff you are really proud of and they just think it’s rubbish!”

This extra-organizational origin of problems was often a primary driver of wickedness, as the subject managers involved had to make major resource allocations in the face of conflicting customer perspectives and demands:

“The buyer at [Hi-Street] is insistent that these tops fit with the merchandising approach but I think it just won’t work ... it’ll bomb and we’ll just end up taking it all back, and that ain’t cheap. I mean, they’re green for God’s sake. Would that “celeb” ever have worn them ... but then again I’ve been wrong before ..?”

“[A retail customer] are desperate to have the new [Zest] line ... they’ll take volume that’s for sure, and we need the sales, but the impact of that channel on the targeted brand image will really not be helpful. But if it gets it on the street, well maybe”.

As the above illustrates, the unpacking of Rittel’s conception of wicked problems allows us to characterise in a simple way the decisional milieu of our studied marketing managers. These milieus did contain problems that had substantially tame co-ordinates in the defined problem space, but these were largely trivial and commercially inconsequential. Their problem portfolios predominantly sat in the zone of problem space illustrated in Figure 4.

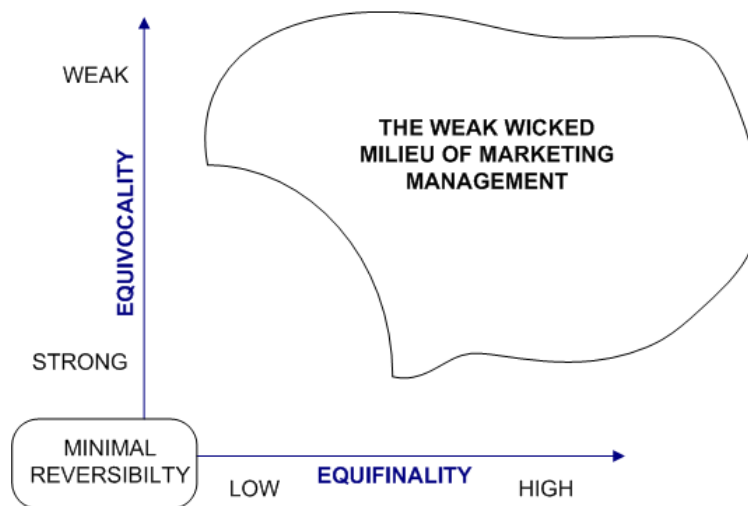


Figure 4
The Weak Wicked Milieu of Marketing Management

The managers largely dealt with a decisional milieu that was almost always weak in character, often highly wicked in nature and, as we shall now see, suffused with commercial contradictions.

6.2 Marketing Managerial Work

Marketing Management – A Warp and Weft of Issues?

In our earlier unpacking of Rittel's conception we dealt with what we see as the 'essential uniqueness' that Rittel was ascribing to wicked problems; a uniqueness that denies the development of general solutions. In his discussion of their uniqueness, however, Rittel contends that: Tame problems repeat themselves; wicked problems are essentially unique. This attempted wicked-tame contrast implies that problems located in the wicked zone do not repeat themselves, and, as discussed, at a certain level of analysis this can always be argued to be the case. However, the 'forms' of the wicked problems facing the studied team of marketing managers clearly repeated themselves; they would say ad-nauseam.

Marples comes to the following conclusion from her studies of managerial work: "*The manager's job can usefully be pictured as a stranded rope made of fibres of different lengths - where length represents time - each fibre coming to the surface one or more times in observable episodes, and representing a single issue*" (1967: 287; see Figure 5). Clearly, given the nature of the paper in which it was embedded, Marples' choice of terminology was not deliberate, but our studies indicate it is highly apposite, as the term 'issue' is most properly regarded as identifying "*a matter that is in dispute between two or more parties ... a point of debate or controversy ... a matter not yet finally settled, and on which the settlement of something else depends*" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged, 2002).

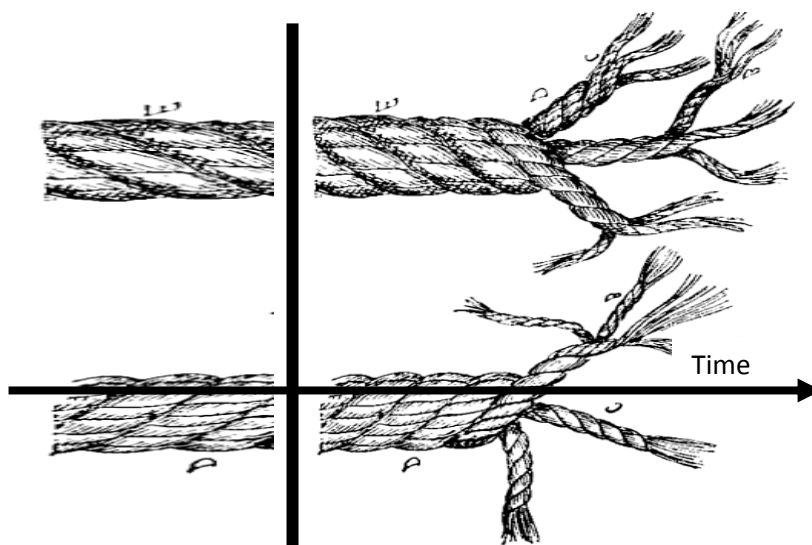


Figure 5
Marketing Managerial Work as a Stranded Rope of Many Fibres

Most of the wickedly problematic issues the studied team of managers faced always had the same commercial context. As a result the ‘rope of issues’ with which our they contended had a temporal morphology that more closely resembles that of a cable, rather than that of a rope; with no threads that come and go with time, only continuous strands of seemingly contradictory commercial imperatives. This cable of contradictions comprises the immanent and persistent commercial issues with which the studied team of managers contended on a daily basis. The metaphorical cross-section of the ‘Cable of Contradictions’ with which the studied team could be seen to have contended is displayed in Figure 6 in the following sub-section. It is a ‘double-skinned’ cable as we will now explain.

The cable’s core strand and its constituent threads

At the core of the cable of contradictions with the studied team contended rests a central multi-fibred strand that we have labelled: ‘Brand Image Development vs. Sales Generation’.

“Too much attention is paid to the thin end of the wedge. The volume comes from the other end, and that’s where we’re not spending the money. We have to do some thin end yes, but the proportions are wrong” [Fitcorp’s UK’s Financial Director].

“Is it really worth putting in all the [X] million dollars [for Advertising]? Why don’t we cut that back and put it there [sales promotion] instead” [Fitcorp’s UK Operations Director].

“We’ve got a customer who wants certain things from Apparat, we have to decide whether we want to do some of those things. Or we can be holier than thou and talk about the brand?” [Fitcorp’s UK Sales Director].

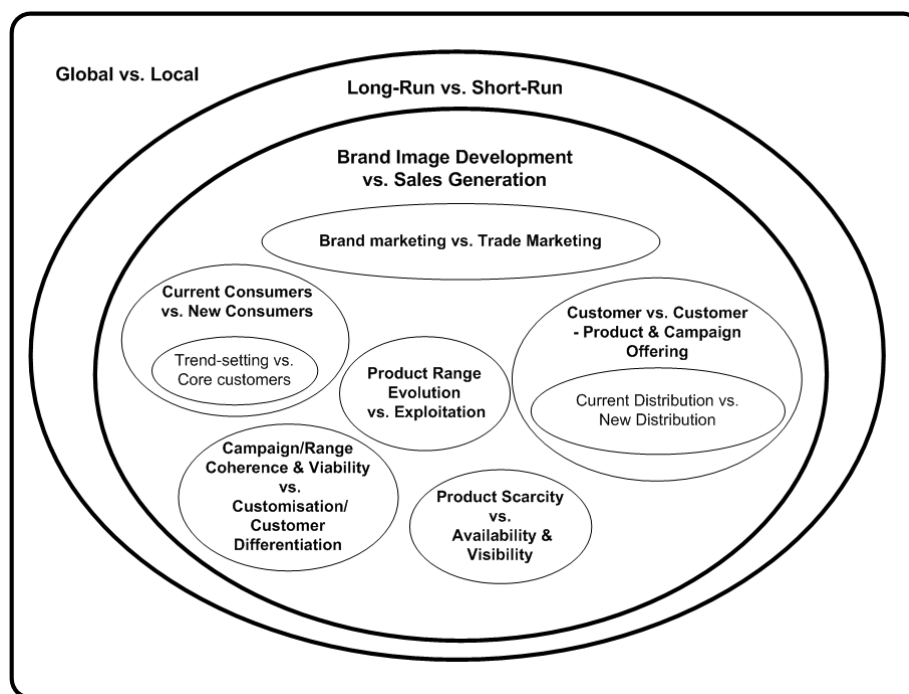


Figure 6
The Cable of Contradictions faced by the team

These foregoing quotes portray the wickedly problematic character of this clash of commercial imperatives, and point to the inter-functional tensions to which they inevitably give rise. But they also highlight only one particular aspect of what is at issue – the allocation of the firm’s finite resources. Even infinite resources would not alleviate the wickedness of many of this core strand’s constituent issues which we now elaborate.

Trade Marketing vs. Brand Marketing: An infinite pool of cash would clearly assist in reconciling one of the strand's constituent dilemmatic needs, that to invest in both trade marketing (down-stream promotion e.g. merchandising and sales promotions) – “*We're always making a lot of pragmatic decisions about doing more co-operative advertising than we'd like to*” and upstream brand marketing (for example, TV advertising, celebrity endorsement) focussed “*on looking for a consumer reaction*”. The fundamental wickedness of this issue, however, rests not in the scarcity of financial resources but in the finite currency of ‘ideas’/‘marketing stories’. Stories that have substantial potential for driving high level consumer brand awareness are similarly attractive to retailers as high value down-channel trade-marketing and hence to the sales-force in their pursuit of ‘sell-in’ rather than the ‘sell-through’ that the exploitation of the same ‘story’ may drive if exploited in an advertising campaign:

“If [a major retailer] says ‘I want that story’ ... there's important and worthwhile debate ... however if they write a big enough order ... well most principles can be traded if there's enough on the order form”

As a result, no matter the extent of available financial resources, the wickedness of this issue remains: “*The marketing teams are trying to move the brand forward. It's at odds with what some [retailers] want*”. As it does, even more so, in all remaining strands of this cable of contradictions.

Customer vs. Customer – Products and Campaigns: “*We're always making a lot of pragmatic decisions about where we put products, what products we promote, with who.*” Although all the retailers wish to stock the *Fitcorp* brand, they require the ability, within the ambit of the brand, to distinguish themselves from their competitors with regard to both ‘message’ and product offer. Each of the retailers clearly wishes to be given a product offer that is distinct from their competitors, whilst at the same time not ‘missing out’, or more crucially for *Fitcorp*, perceiving having ‘missed out’ on anything:

“The retailers are very sensitive to what their competitors are doing. We can't be seen to be out there with a brand campaign, or a particular [product], that isn't available to all the retailers”.

The product range structure and the options and flexibility within the promotional campaigns had to enable the engineering of these perceived distinctions, whilst simultaneously avoiding the complexity and breadth that could destroy commercial viability: “*It's a balancing act. You have to make sure there are not too many overlaps [between the major retailers]*”.

The simultaneous coherence and customisation had to be achieved in order to fulfil this inherently paradoxical customer demand and ensure *Fitcorp's* commercial and communicational effectiveness. A simultaneity that was made exceptionally difficult to achieve due to conflicting perceptions with regard to the relative positioning of the retailers; a retailer may think they are the perfect channel for a particular story or product but as Adam, the marketing director, commented “*The way the accounts see themselves, and the way we see them, can be very different.*”

Within this there was also a visible tension in terms of the customer segments *Fitcorp* was trying to attract against the segments it currently targeted: “*...marketing is trying to cool the brand [for Segment A] and get hot with [Segment B] ... they're chasing this thin end of the wedge. That's where this disconnect is coming in ... [with our core consumers]*” [Product Manager]. In this instance, the marketing team wishes to deploy resources away from *Fitcorp's* traditional consumers in pursuit of new consumers within the potentially trend-setting consumer segments that only have commercial significance in the longer run through brand image development. This tension was also clearly felt between functions: “*I think they [Marketing] forget what pays the mortgage. They're trying to get the alpha consumer*” [Sales Director]. A truly wicked dilemma given that the targeted consumers were not within the returning consumer base of *Fitcorp's* key retail accounts.

Current ‘Distribution’ vs. New ‘Distribution’. As well as tensions between segments and functions, tensions were also felt in terms of distribution channels: “*[certain] ranges go to different distribution, much higher prices, limited distribution ... very important for that sort of trickle-down effect [but also] conflict because our volume retailers are not hitting these consumers*”. The consumer marketing group perceived it as imperative “*to get the brand seen more in aspirational retail distribution and be less reliant on the ‘big uglies’ [the established high street retailers for sportswear goods]*” in order to develop the brand image, in a context where every emerging story had a bigger immediate sales potential in the ‘big uglies’ and when they would inevitably react negatively to being ‘missed out’. The following quote illustrates this scenario:

“Great looking new [product/story for a new product line] ... [we] might just want to keep the distribution to those kind of more fashionable retailers but [the Sales Director] quite reasonably might be saying ‘yeah, but that trend is

very current let's open it out to everybody and pump some volume'. The sales director also feels a certain nervousness about the reaction of our core retailers if we opened up with new accounts [X] and [Y] particularly in a different channel".

This wicked problem is further compounded by the drift of the purchasing habits of high margin consumers away from the established retail players and the choices *Fitcorp* should make given this change in consumer behaviour: "the target [trend setting] consumers are turning away from the [main] retailers [our key accounts]. We have to address where we are going to go to pick up that consumer again".

Product Range Evolution vs. Exploitation: With regard to product range evolution the team had to strike a delicate balance between the confidence of the retailers, the 'edginess' of the brand and the evolution of its positioning, and shorter run commercial expectations:

"[The] disadvantage of [re-building the range regularly is] the buyers don't get any confidence ... they don't get to know the styles, it means you are fresh but..."

"...So the balance I am trying to strike with our product line is that we move it on, that we're challenging in certain areas, but that we still maximise our volume potential and satisfy sales".

"...Sales will never move product on, sales will always want to sell what they sold last time because they've got some history on it. Design always wants to be creative and move it on too fast, so you've got to kind of manage the two".

Product Scarcity vs. Availability. In the particular market in which *Fitcorp* operates the consumer 'buzz' and word of mouth created by the 'limited' availability of a significant product that is new to the market are a treasured PR/promotional opportunity. Paradoxically few retailers, or sales directors, however, find it a commercially attractive proposition.

"The idea seems to be to sell out in [x] weeks [fast] ... the actual idea's to sell out. But if I was a retailer why would I put it in the window? Window space is premium space and we've got [x] stores and only [y] of the product. Is it worth putting it in the window if we have no real stocks of it?" [Sales Director].

The Encapsulating Tensions

Long Run vs. Short-Run. Encapsulating and pervasive within the complex of commercial contradictions is the fundamental business tension of 'the long run versus the short run return' that *Fitcorp* faced, as illustrated in the following quotes:

"Sales and marketing come at things from a different point of view. One can be very much focussed on the short term and the 'sell-in'. [The] Marketing team's concerned with that too, but the marketing team's also concerned with how we drive the brand forward in the long term".

"...pressure comes on the local businesses. [The] MD 'gets' [Sub-Brand A], he wants to spend on [it], but he also sees his sales are going down, and in the short-term [it] isn't gonna drive any sales so..."

"[Advertising] it's the area that people feel we should cut back on as it isn't gonna give huge returns straight away..."

The sales director's pre-occupation with "hitting the number" in the short run and the longer run pre-occupation of marketing with "getting hot with the consumer" and "'cooling' the brand" was clearly the critical tension in the business:

"The thick end of the wedge is about volume, thin end about image, you have to put a disproportionate amount of effort and money here [thin end] to make sure that down the track you're delivering here [thick end]"

"[Marketing] has this thing about driving this [image], but I'm saying hang on here we've got to do 450 million of sales dollars this year ... we've got to sell something..."

In the short run the only thing that counted towards paying the wage bill was the 'sell-in' to the retailers, not the 'sell-through' to consumers, and the weight of this short-term consideration very often won out: "...most principles can be

traded if there's enough on the order form.” But, as was repeatedly pointed out, “if in the longer run the products get stuck like glue on the retailers’ shelves we are just fooling ourselves”. The interweaving of the long-run/short-run and brand image/sales generation (‘push’ vs. ‘pull’) tensions, exacerbated by the firm’s channel context, rendered the co-reconciliation of these fundamental commercial contradictions a particularly wicked problem. This encapsulating tension highlights the problematic futurity dimension of the radically weak situations with which the team contended, and this issue dominated deliberations, as the following quote illustrates:

“[The Managing Director says] *‘that's all very well but. You've gotta make a real compelling case for that [X] million investment which says what's the ad' gonna look like, why's it gonna drive sell-in in the short term, what's your return's gonna be etc. etc.?’ But that's nigh-on impossible to do*”.

Such deliberations were particularly problematic given what marketing felt they should be doing in order to be successful: “*We want to go where people are uncomfortable. Everybody wants to go into a safe place ... we want to go in the opposite direction. That's what good marketing is*”. This was particularly problematic given the asymmetric assessment of these sorts of judgements that utilised the classical techno-rationality of management accounting; evidently perceived by the marketing director as ‘irrational’ in its ‘rationality’:

“You've got to, for two or three years, invest heavily [in brand image promotion], and nothing we can put anywhere will ever convince the Financial Director or anybody you're going to get a return on it. OK, well we'll get half of them wrong. All you can do is to try to minimise the risk by doing a bit of research and checking as you go”.

Clearly the feedback loop on longer run marketing investment is long and what could be termed as very slack. The linkage of cause and effect is temporally tenuous and easily contestable; the situation is weak and memory is fallible. This propagates a self-reinforcing cycle of causal indeterminacy. As a result, as Mason and Mitroff (1981 Chapter 1) point out, achieving innovative reconciliations of wicked problems will not always be appreciated, or rewarded. This is despite the courage, conviction and creativity it might demand. A manager might not, after all, receive the ‘credit due’, or even still be there, by the time the reconciliation bears fruit. So why should she/he take the risk? “*In your heart and your head you know what the right thing to do is, but actually the easiest thing to do is to forget it.*”

Global vs. Local. The above challenge, was itself being pursued in the context of the relentless and ambitious business performance expectations emanating from *Fitcorp*’s global headquarters: “*marketing's mantra is that we have got to invest for a period of time ... but we've got a parent company that isn't prepared to wait ... we've got a parent that wants the evolution to happen in a quarter, not in two or three years*” [Financial Director]. These intense short-run expectations were compounded by the Global HQ’s parallel demands for *Fitcorp* UK’s compliance and alignment with worldwide brand marketing policies and programmes:

“This will work globally they say ... don't mess about with it ... it's a one size fits all mentality”.

“This centralised control, this global brand custodian sort of stuff, it's almost crippling us in terms of our ability to move and make things happen”.

Certain policies and programmes were, at times, seen to run counter to the business interests of *Fitcorp* UK:

“Most difficult moments are around this sort of tension between local and central control, particularly when you genuinely feel a route that is being taken by the centre is going to be detrimental to your local brand 'n business. They're currently in a think global act global mode.”

And such local interests were often very difficult to promote to HQ:

“If we kind of get on the front foot and try to tell them what's wrong or give them an opinion we get classed as being difficult, that we're building a wall, that we're an island. The person that gets the most shit from global [HQ] is [Adam]” [Financial Director].

Adam had stood his ground in discussions with Global HQ and had, most of his colleagues surmised, paid a very heavy personal price: “*I didn't really see as it as a personal risk ... just thought about it as doing the job*” (Adam PD-Interview A). The ‘PD’ stands for ‘post departure’.

7. Discussion and Conclusions

“[We] need to undertake more in-depth ethnographic studies of what marketers in different contexts actually do, relating the intentions and understandings of those managers to the marketing actions that are subsequently taken” (Brownlie *et al.* 1994: 9).

In this study we have responded to a call for in-depth ethnographic research into how marketing is actually done in organizations (Skalen and Hackley 2011; Brownlie *et al.* 1994) and have explored the milieu from which marketers must craft the ‘understandings’ on which they found their intentions. Managing is about making decisions and solving problems, usually quite important ones. How managers do so is clearly of vital importance and a primary driver of that process, and hence of their behaviour, is the character of the decisional milieu with which they contend – it is this that we have attempted to illuminate.

We argue that the research demonstrates the power Rittel’s wicked problem conception holds, when unpacked, for helping us understand the nature of the decisional milieu of marketing managers. Our contention is that marketing managers behave the way they do in large part due to the ‘*weak if not always wicked*’ co-ordinates of the problem space they inhabit, and that the elaborated unpacking of Rittel’s wicked problem conception allows the penetrative characterisation of that problem space. The, often extreme, weakness of the situations in which the subject managers find themselves, combines with the pervasive equifinality and minimal reversibility that they face in their endeavours to ensure that many, if not all, of their problems are located in a substantially wicked zone of ‘problem space’. A high degree of situational weakness pervaded the subject managers’ endeavours.

This is an understanding that shines a penetrating and critical light on the current marketing management pedagogy. The predominantly ‘weak-wicked’ positioning of the marketing managerial problem space implies that the traditional formal rational problem-solving model cannot help; a model embedded in, if not wholly underpinning, the traditional marketing management pedagogy.

In fact the situation is probably even worse than this latter comment implies. It may be that using the model may actually result in worse solutions being adopted in attempts to solve a problem. There are great temptations to make leaps of logic when situations are weak and there is a tendency to privilege accurate but less consequential data that you do have, especially when one has spent significant resources acquiring it, over important information that you feel you need but simply cannot acquire. Given formal techno-rationality is the bedrock foundation of the marketing management discourse and pedagogy, the implication is that much of its mainstream content does not speak to the most crucial aspect of marketing management practice – decision making – and that its deployment could in fact be a retrograde step.

The team we studied in great detail was seen to confront an unrelenting and persistent array of commercial contradictions for which they constantly sought and re-sought innovative reconciliations. The issues that constitute the cable of contradictions that the team confronted, each individually possess weak-wicked problem character; in effect the entire cable is located in the weak-wicked zone of problem space. However, it is in the weaving together of these issues, their inter-penetration and intrinsic interdependence, and with their embedding within each other, that the profound wickedness of the constellation of issues faced by the team becomes fully apparent. Their pursuit of innovative reconciliations within this nexus of complex-wicked problems (Mason and Mitroff 1981) was an intensely deliberative and creative process. It is a process to which the techno-rationalist marketing management discourse and pedagogy does not speak. The substance of the subject managers’ ‘marketing management’, rests in their milieu-mediated socio-cognitive deliberative engagement with the ‘*cable of commercial contradictions*’ that they confront in their weakly situated wicked problem littered milieu. It is a techno-political process that is suffused with personal risk – as Adam, the marketing director, found out to his cost.

We believe the perspective on the character of the decisional milieu here developed can provide the foundation for a radical re-assessment of the design of marketing management education. It is a re-construction project that does not require the jettisoning of traditional teachings, much of which has proven instrumental utility, but simply their proper positioning in pedagogy, that prior to this engagement, exposures students to their philosophical foundations; foundations that have inculcated inappropriate assumptions as to the character of the decisional milieu in which marketing managers are immersed. We contend that through the developed conception of wicked problem-space we have developed a rich picture of the decisional milieu that marketing managers confront that is readily picked up and deployed by students. We believe that students should be driven to reflect on this richer picture of the decisional milieu of marketing managers throughout their engagement with the subject of marketing management, not least when they engage with case studies – particularly those of the marketing planning ilk, and even more crucially when engaged in marketing management simulations, and intensively before they engage with commercial collaborators/clients in practical projects. Contentions we are currently evaluating in practice at both postgraduate and undergraduate levels.

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